

## Holy Roller High

It was five o'clock on Thursday when Curt, Bobby, Scott, and I gathered at the closet door. Curt, the burglar among us, had figured out how to pick the lock months earlier when he'd discovered it was where the school stored soft drinks. It was easy enough to get in, but we were in no way prepared for what we found there.

"Damn almighty," I whispered in awe.

"Yep," Curt agreed.

A chill skittered up my back. Stacked before us, lit only by a naked light bulb suspended from the ceiling, was a mound of records, tapes, magazines, comics, and games the likes of which I had never seen. They were ours for the taking, and we had a holy roller named Frank Wilson to thank for our good fortune.

Frank had arrived at our high school three days earlier, the latest in a long line of evangelists brought in to help rescue our souls. He was a self-professed authority on rock and roll music, his claim to fame being that he'd played bass guitar on the 1950's hit "One-Eyed One-Horned Flying Purple People Eater." The notoriety associated with that wacky tune had given him insights into the music industry and its intricacies non of us could ever hope to equal.

On Monday, Frank had stood at the pulpit of our school chapel. Sweat ran down his face, and he wore a pained expression that brought to my mind a woman about to give birth. "When you listen to rock and roll music," he bellowed, "you can see demons fornicating." Then his eyes narrowed. "If you know what to look for."

I wondered what he saw when he listened to Barry Manilow.

Frank Wilson was a mean-looking man with a face like a bulldog and a flat head topped off by a crew cut. His neck bulged around his collar, and a perpetual look of rage inhabited his face, making it flush deep red and suggesting that his head might explode at any moment.

Frank came armed to his teeth with frightening stories about all manner of evil that he felt we, the God-fearing Protestant Youth of America, should avoid at all costs: ouija boards, tarot cards, LPs, 45s, eight tracks, four tracks, reel-to-reels, video games, television, magazines, paperbacks, crucifixes, stereos, comic books. At the end of Monday's service, Frank called for us to bring in any offending or naughty albums,

tapes, posters, books, and cards to add to a huge pile to be burned at the end of the week.

So there we stood in the closet on Thursday, thankful for evangelical fundamentalism and marveling at the treasure we'd found.

As I'd sat in chapel Monday, looking at my friends around me, the mercenary and music lover in me had taken over. There in the hard, uncomfortable church pew, I'd formulated a plan.

The four of us worked after school as janitors for minimum wage, cleaning toilets and classrooms. If students brought items for the bonfire as Frank suggested, it would leave a nice, fat pile of tapes and records for us to dig into. What we liked, we'd keep and what we didn't, we'd trade. We were ecstatic.

I'd doubted seriously that there would be any loot on Monday night and had been correct. There was a Mannheim Steamroller eight-track I was sure our hippie groundskeeper had yanked from his van in a fit of piety, but nothing else of any interest. Tuesday had been fairly lean and Wednesday hadn't had much more.

But Thursday evening was a different story.

I stared in disbelief at the stack of goodies, feeling both pity and contempt for the dupes who'd thrown these prized possessions away for so paltry a reason as fear for their immortal souls. The important thing was that the tapes and records got good homes. That was what really mattered.

I looked at Curt, Bobby and Scott. "There's only one thing we have to worry about."

Bobby sighed. "The Nazi."

Curt and Scott nodded in agreement.

The Nazi was Charles, a fellow student and co-worker who took it upon himself to play adult when there were none around. Charles believed it was his job to take charge of us, particularly in the absence of grownups, and we often joked that he'd one day return as headmaster of the school. He was the kind of pain-in-the-ass who'd tell you he was a born leader because it made him believe it.

"Where's he at now?" I asked.

"I think he's upstairs," Scott offered.

I nodded. "Okay, this is what we're gonna do. We sort through this stuff and take what we want."

Curt frowned. "How do we get it out of here?"

"We separate *our* stuff from the stuff we don't want," I explained. "As soon as we know where the Nazi is, we make a break for it. We'll hide it behind the dumpster and pick it up tomorrow night when no one's around."

Bobby wasn't following. "What if they know it's gone?"

I shrugged. "It won't matter. We'll haul the stuff out the back door and hide it."

I noticed the blank look on Scott's face and guessed what he was thinking. Of the four of us, he could be counted on as the first to be swayed by the scare tactics of a hellfire and brimstone preacher.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He shrugged. "You think any of it's true?"

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, man. Mick Jagger is a Satanic priest? The Eagles are devil worshipers? He thought Alice Cooper was a woman and Stevie Nicks was a warlock. He's an idiot."

"Yeah," Scott admitted, still sounding unconvinced. "But the 'Stairway to Heaven' thing sounded real."

Curt laughed. "That's stupid, man. Every preacher plays it, but it never makes any sense."

"I heard it," Scott protested.

Bobby shook his head. "I didn't hear *that*, but his damned thumb creeps me out." He shivered.

Bobby had a point. Frank Wilson was missing the thumb of his left hand and he'd often shake the hand at us during key moments throughout his tirades, presumably in an attempt to scare us. But I wasn't that easily intimidated.

I shrugged. "Maybe he lost the thumb to the devil. Or maybe he wore it down to a nub during a long version of 'Freebird.'"

Scott's eyes widened. "You shouldn't joke about it, Larry."

"Frank Wilson *is* a joke," I said.

It was true. Wilson was typical of the idiots who paraded through our school. Twenty years had seen him through three failed marriages, one prison term, two drug addictions—one to heroin and one to Demerol—and a subsequent two-year religious correspondence course guaranteed to make him a bona fide preacher. That qualified him to minister to young and impressionable children between the ages of twelve and eighteen, all in need of a pillar of fire to follow.

Curt puffed his chest up. "I'm here to bring you the truth of the evils of rock music," he said, imitating Frank Wilson's voice. "I'm here to lead you through the wilderness and out on the other side. You're all on the slippery slope to Hell!" He rocked back and forth like a zombie.

I laughed. "If we listened to him, we'd be free of anything fun."

It was nothing new. Anyone who has spent any time in a Southern Baptist church knows the slope of which Frank spoke and that the only way to scramble up is to throw a grappling hook onto a bastion of strength

and character. Frank Wilson believed in his heart of hearts that he was that bastion and that he would be the one to redeem every one of us. That was the puritan principle our school had been founded upon.

Scott nodded. "I know. But it still seems kinda scary the way he talks about it."

"Sure it does," I agreed. "That's his plan. Everything fun is sinful."

Frank had proclaimed on Monday that dancing was a sin. "It is descended from the gyrations of African devil worshipers," he'd said, leaning casually on the pulpit like he was about to tell us a dirty joke. What Frank was getting at, I thought, was the more one gyrated the more one pleased Satan.

I stood in the closet and considered the implications of what we had learned during the week. If Frank had his way, we'd all find ourselves disillusioned and floundering in guilt over our sinfulness. I couldn't speak for the others, but the only thing I'd been able to think about during Frank's sermons had been the pile of tapes and records sitting in the closet at the other end of the building.

I looked at my friends. "Are we gonna do this or not?"

Curt and Bobby nodded without hesitation, but a moment passed before Scott joined them.

"No ouija boards," he said finally.

"Oh, come on," I said. "Don't tell me you believe that, too."

I shouldn't have been surprised. Frank had enlightened us about ouija boards, each of which had a demon in charge of its subversive activities. I'd imagined the CEO of Milton-Bradley signing an exclusive use agreement with the Prince of Darkness, in which the two parties consented that a demon would take up residence in each toy.

"I've burned many ouija boards in my day," Frank had said. "And every one of them had one thing in common. The demon inside of it fled in terror." He'd flapped his arms to help drive the point home.

"I wonder where the demons go?" I asked Scott, trying to keep a straight face.

Curt jumped in. "Maybe to a crucifix? Or a tarot card or a Black Sabbath album?" A smile crept across his face.

Scott's face reddened. "You guys go ahead and make fun. But when you're possessed by the devil, you won't be laughing."

I waved his comment away and pointed toward the corner. "Let's see what's in there."

"Good idea," said Curt, dropping down to one knee in front of the pile.

Scott hung by the door and watched the rest of us, and his

reluctance gave me an idea.

"Scott," I said, "why don't you go see where the Nazi's at? We'll go through this stuff and pull out some for you."

He nodded. "Alright, but no ouija boards."

I held up a hand. "No ouija boards."

Scott walked out, closing the door, and I sat down on the cold floor and started rifling through the records. Bobby picked up a box of toilet paper, dumped its contents on the floor, and placed it by the stack.

Nearly everyone of consequence was represented in that mountain of contraband: the Beatles, KISS, Lynyrd Skynyrd, the mighty Led Zeppelin, Queen, Alice Cooper, ELO, Aerosmith, Rush, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden. There were Harlequin romances, bawdy novels of various types, science fiction books, magazines, comics, and a book on how to hypnotize trashy women. I also saw two unopened packs of tarot cards, a divining rod, a rabbit's foot, and a magic eight ball.

Curt leaned forward and pulled something out of the pile. "Hey, a crucifix!" He pointed it at me. "Don't let it zap you."

I laughed, remembering what Frank had told us regarding the evils of Catholicism and of crucifixes in particular. "I awoke one night to a burning sensation on my back," Frank had said. "Guess what it was?"

I'd shrugged in my seat as if he'd asked me the question personally. I had a few ideas, but felt voicing them in public wouldn't go over well with our faculty.

He stomped his feet. "It was Jesus! But not the Jesus you and I know. Oh, no."

Jesus—the Catholic version, of course—was attempting to burn holes in Frank's back with his beady little eyes. But of course he'd made short work of the counterfeit Jesus and tossed Him out the window. Catholic Jesus had been no match for Frank Wilson. I watched Curt place the crucifix back on the pile, thinking it *was* a little creepy.

"There's lots of Stones in here," Bobby remarked, holding up a copy of the Rolling Stones' *Some Girls*.

"Well, of course there are," I said, picking up another Stones album and flipping it over to look at the back. "They're devil worshipers."

On Wednesday, Frank had told us of a Rolling Stones concert he'd attended at which Mick Jagger had cavorted onstage with a twenty-foot inflatable, uncircumcised "man-thing." We'd giggled self-consciously in the chapel and it still brought a smile to my face in the closet. As white Anglo-Saxon Protestants of the Southern variety, we hadn't a clue what an uncircumcised man-thing looked like, nor could we understand why it was so important that Frank point out it was uncircumcised.

I threw the Stones album into the box. "You can have the Stones. Just give me any Zeppelin or Skynyrd."

I picked up an Iron Butterfly record and uncovered what I'd been looking for: the ouija board Scott was terrified of.

"Hey," Curt said, "let's make Scott kiss that thing when he comes back. He'll piss on himself."

I shook my head. "It stays in."

"Why?" Bobby asked, opening an ELO double album.

"It just does." The theory of the demon in the ouija board appealed to me for two reasons: first, it suggested Frank Wilson was a lunatic, and second, I thought that if he *wasn't* a lunatic and it *was* true that a demon might scream, I wanted to be around Friday when it happened. Screaming demons aren't something you hear every day, even in the Bible Belt. "Just leave it," I said. "You'll see tomorrow."

A muffled knock came from the door and we heard a faint voice.

Curt hopped up and put his ear to the crack. "Scott?"

"Let me in," Scott said.

Curt popped the door open and Scott peered through the opening. "He's upstairs at the other end of the hall."

That was all I needed to hear. "Let's go."

Bobby picked up the box and Curt got the rest of the items on the floor. After one last look around, I pushed my friends out and turned the light off.

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Friday morning came, and the four of us arrived at the stadium ready to see some burning and hoping to hear a scalded demon. We'd arrived early to get seats close to the action, but the bleachers were now packed; the entire student body had come out for the event. The band was all set to play, and six cheerleaders stood by, ready to cheer Frank Wilson on to glory.

Frank rose from a metal chair down in front and walked out onto the football field. He held a microphone close to his mouth. "You know," he said, his voice booming from speakers behind us, "I'm a little disappointed there's not more items in the bin to be burned."

I grinned, thinking of how we'd stashed three-quarters of the loot behind the school dumpster the night before. The only things left in the closet were so cheesy and offensive that I found it hard to believe anyone would've wanted them in the first place.

I heard a commotion from the other end of the bleachers and saw

two students, one of which was Charles the Nazi, pushing a cart with a large garbage can on top. Charles and the other student, a boy named Billy Baxter, began to unload the can onto a little fire pit that had been built the night before. I leaned forward as they piled the items on the grate, trying to see what was there. It looked like there was more than we'd left Thursday night.

"The Lord Jesus be with us!" Frank yelled, his eyes bulging. "Behold, the instruments of sin." The word *sin*, by Frank's usage, had two syllables.

"Lord Jesus be with us!" the cheerleaders yelled as they jumped, kicked and shook their pom poms.

I looked to my right at Curt. "Look at all that stuff. There wasn't that much left last night."

Curt squinted. "Maybe there was."

I caught sight of a KISS album I was sure I had set aside to trade with a friend's brother. "Bullshit. Somebody squealed on us."

Curt and I both turned to look at Scott, who had suddenly become very interested in what Frank Wilson was up to. So much so that he refused to look at us.

"Scott," I hissed. "What did you do?"

Frank called out again from the field. "This is where we take back our schools and country. This is where we say 'no' to the devil."

"Just say 'no,'" the cheerleaders echoed, and set about building a pyramid.

Charles and Billy finished emptying the garbage can and stepped back, looking pleased. I was now sure everything we'd pulled out of the bin the night before was on that pile. It had to have been Scott.

"Satan thinks he owns us," Frank said. "But we know better."

The crowd sat in silence as the cheerleaders' pyramid toppled.

"Can I get an 'amen'?" Frank asked, looking me straight in the eye. He knew what we'd done.

Charles bellowed a lone *amen* and there were a few half-hearted assents from the bleachers, but the group remained quiet for the most part. They were, after all, Southern Baptists.

"Talk to me, my brothers and sisters," Frank screamed, breaking eye contact with me. "I need to hear you."

He began an awkward jig and squirted the albums, tapes and magazines with lighter fluid. I wondered what sort of spirits might be summoned by Frank's dance and asked myself if God could possibly find it as ridiculous as I did. I thought He might.

Frank struck a match and threw it on the pile. Flames erupted and

reached into the air as he continued his dance. I leaned forward in my seat, my anger forgotten for the moment, and listened intently for a scream from the ouija board. Any noise would probably have made my skin crawl at that point, but there was nothing to hear other than Frank's ranting.

"Bullshit," I muttered.

"They're like the flames of Hell," Frank cried, pointing at the fire. "Watch them burn."

The crowd was responding to Frank now, no doubt inspired by the flames. I heard gasps and moans from those around me.

"Bullshit," I repeated, louder this time, but no one heard me.

Spurred on by Frank Wilson's dog and pony show, I stood up and drew in the deepest breath I could muster. I bent my knees and braced myself, determined that I would be heard. I threw my head back and screamed at the top of my lungs: "BULLSHIT!"

Frank stopped dancing and the crowd's wailing ceased; my cursing had its desired effect. If I hadn't been so angry, I would have been proud of myself. It takes a lot to get holy rollers to stop rolling once they get started.

Frank Wilson looked at me for a long moment before he spoke. "What did you say, son?"

"Damn, man," Curt whispered. "You're gonna get demerits for cussing."

"I don't give a damn," I replied. "He burned our stuff."

He shrugged. "It wasn't really ours."

I stood and faced Wilson, pushing Curt aside. "I said 'bullshit'." I shivered, my adrenaline ebbing, and realized I'd just signed my own suspension slip. And I had no idea what Frank Wilson was about to do. Southern preachers are often known to be off balance and unpredictable, and he was no exception.

Frank looked at Charles and got a nod. I knew what it meant: *that's him*. Scott had sold us out to the Nazi.

Frank looked away from me and returned his gaze to the crowd at large. "It has come to my attention, brothers and sisters, that there has been a theft."

A gasp came from the bleachers around us and I realized where this was headed. I decided to try and take control while I still could.

I hopped over the bench in front of me and walked out onto the field, feeling the eyes of my classmates on my back. Frank Wilson stood a full head taller than me, but I didn't care. I reached out and grabbed the microphone from him before he knew what had happened.

"You can't steal something that doesn't belong to anybody," I yelled, momentarily confused by my delayed voice coming from the public address

system. "He's the thief."

"Give me that microphone," Wilson hissed. He reached out and tried to take it from me, but I evaded his grasp.

"This guy's a fraud," I yelled. I ran away from Wilson even as I saw Charles and his henchman heading toward me. "He's a fake. The ouija board didn't even scream."

Frank lunged at me, his eyes on fire, but I escaped him again.

"He's only happy when he's mad," I huffed. "And he's even happier when he's making other people mad."

I looked to the crowd for a sign of understanding, but there was nothing there; they were dead. Even if they'd known what I was saying was true, they wouldn't have responded. It wasn't that they'd been brainwashed. It was that they didn't give a damn. They'd come for the fire.

People like that lived for the fire.

I stopped running and tossed the microphone back to Frank. "Here. Take it."

Charles caught up with me and grabbed me around the neck.

"Get your damned hands off of me," I spat, elbowing the Nazi in his fat stomach. "Idiot."

It occurred to me that Frank Wilson was a pitiful man, but I couldn't find it in my heart to muster pity for him. The fact that he claimed to be the right hand of God meant nothing to me. He was just a man. A man who needed serious mental help.

I turned to face my three friends in the bleachers, one of which had recently betrayed me. Scott, Curt, and Bobby all sat looking at me with wide eyes like they couldn't believe what I'd done. It didn't surprise me, though. What was my friendship when compared with the appeal of a snake oil salesman like Frank Wilson?

I was about to walk away when something smashed into the back of my head and dropped me to my knees. I fell forward and rolled over to see Frank Wilson standing over me with a folded metal chair.

I winced. "What the hell?"

"You made me do that," he said, dropping the chair and wiping his hands on his pants.

"You're nuts," I told him.

He was about to reply when a red blur hit him from the side and whisked him out of my sight. Satisfied that things were under control, I passed out.

"Man, I've never seen you so pissed." It was Curt's voice.

I opened my eyes and was blinded by the morning sun. I was lying on a bench with my head on something soft, but I had no idea how long I'd been there. I tried to sit up.

"Hang on. Don't get up." This time it was Scott, and his voice reminded me of my anger. "I'm sorry, man," he said. He must've read my mind.

I sighed. "It's alright." My head hurt too much for me to stay mad. "Where's Wilson?"

"The cops took him away," Scott answered.

"You're shitting me." I tried to sit up again.

"Nope," Curt said, pushing me back down. "You've gotta stay down till the nurse gets here."

I shook my head gently. "Where's everybody else?"

Curt chuckled. "They all took off like there was fire."

I remembered that there *had been* a fire and groaned. "All those albums, gone," I said.

"Sorry," Scott repeated. "I got scared."

"Don't worry," I assured him. "It's just a shame."

I'd been right about Frank Wilson being off kilter, but I hadn't known how far. I was lucky he hadn't beaten the hell out of me.

"What happened to Wilson?" I asked, remembering the red blur. "Who hit him?"

"Coach Brenner."

"*Old* Coach Brenner?" I asked. "He's got to be seventy."

Curt shrugged. "He got a running start."

I laughed. It couldn't have been any more perfect if Frank Wilson had groped a cheerleader. The combination of my impending suspension and the ache in my head was a hell of a price to pay, but the thought of Frank Wilson preaching to dope heads and drunks in jail made me feel better. And it meant there was one less preacher to torment us.

"Here comes the nurse," Scott said.

I smiled. "I'll be damned." Maybe Frank Wilson could do the convicts some good.

It was doubtful, but one never knew.